



# Access Between and Beyond Borders

## Abstract

Using a life history method to illustrate the college admission process for undocumented students, this article demonstrates how students' social contexts (e.g., schooling, family, migration, and labor) influence their college choice processes and participation in the broader project of college-going. The central argument claims that if admission officers and college counselors want to make increasing college opportunities for undocumented students a priority, then it is incumbent upon professionals to increase their understanding of the pre-college contexts from which undocumented students struggle to persist. The life history narratives presented in this article serve to begin that training, pointing to key moments in college-going processes that admission and counseling professionals should seek to learn more about.

There is a genesis to any student's college application. That genesis gives rise to any number of pathways that might eventually include a moment wherein a student seeks admission to a college or university. For undocumented students—those whom reside in the United States without legal documentation of their right to be here—the genesis occurred beyond the borders of their home and their pathways took form between that place of origin and their developing social identity as “undocumented.” Accessing college is, in many ways, a political battle for undocumented students. It is a battle fought over the political terrain between and beyond the borders of their home of residence and their home of origin. Understanding the contexts that shape this battle and constitute undocumented students' genesis and pathways to college admission strengthens admission officers' and college counselors' tools for serving undocumented students. To these ends, this article presents a life history of an undocumented college applicant, illustrating the social and cultural contexts that help shape educational pathways.

College-going literacy is the framework that guided the life history approach taken in this study. The life history of Carlitos—a composite character drawn from the experiences of four undocumented male students in California—is presented, followed by an argument that admission officers and college counselors need to become college-going pedagogues for undocumented students, outlining in greater detail the role and responsibility of such an identity for admission professionals.

## Undocumented Students in American Higher Education

Undocumented students in American higher education have been called invisible, but the fact remains that they participate in college and college admission as part of their everyday lives. In any given year, approximately 50,000–65,000 undocumented students graduate from high school (Gonzalez 2007; Oliveraz 2006; Passel 2005). Yet, estimates suggest that there are between 7,000–13,000 undocumented students entering colleges and universities across the United States each year (Gonzalez 2007;

Common barriers to college for undocumented students are similar to barriers faced by most students: financing higher education, K-12 academic preparation and focus, college counseling, family familiarity, and restrictive admission policies.

Passel 2003). Even though these numbers are expected to rise and keep rising as migration into the US continues and undocumented children come of age, the gross disparity between high school graduates and college enrollees is startling. In sum, undocumented high school graduates enroll in college at rates of between 5-10 percent, startlingly lower than the 66 percent national average (NCES 2007).

Undocumented students are highly concentrated in urban centers such as Los Angeles, Houston and New York, but they are found across the country, including rural areas like Iowa, North Carolina and Colorado (Bruna 2007; Foner, Rumbaut, & Gold 2000; Gildersleeve & Ranero, forthcoming; Hamman, Wortham, & Murillo 2001). In turn, undocumented students can be found in any community and might seek admission to a variety of postsecondary institutions. However, trends suggest that most undocumented students are more likely to begin their postsecondary careers at community colleges rather than four-year institutions (Gibson 2003; Kurleander 2006; Person & Rosenbaum 2006). Undocumented students are predominantly Latino, although some students come from African, Asian/Pacific Islander, and European ethnicities (Passel & Cohn 2008).

Common barriers to college for undocumented students are similar to barriers faced by most students: financing higher education, K-12 academic preparation and focus, college counseling, family familiarity, and restrictive admission policies (Gildersleeve, forthcoming 2007, 2006; McDonough & Gildersleeve 2006; Perna 2006). Yet, their status as undocumented immigrants informs these barriers, creating more particularized constraints for students to navigate and negotiate en route to college admission. These constraints include contested rights to admission, immigrant-specific barriers to financial aid and contested in-state tuition privileges (Diaz-Strong & Meiners 2007; Gildersleeve & Ranero, forthcoming; Gildersleeve, Rumann, & Mondragón, forthcoming). There are some institutions that directly refuse admission to undocumented students, such as South Carolina and Alabama (Olivas 2009). Federal and state financial aid policies explicitly exclude undocumented students. In-state tuition privileges at public institutions are political hot topics across a number of states in today's political arena. These constraints on students' educational opportunities create a generally hostile climate for

undocumented students as they seek to develop skills and understandings that assist them in their college choice processes (Gildersleeve, Rumann, & Mondragón, forthcoming; Huber & Malagon 2007).

Focusing on the social and cultural contexts that shape students' college choice processes and practices, this article uses life history narratives to illustrate the tensions experienced by undocumented students as they apply to college, and how those tensions accumulate over students' life-course. The goal is to glean insights for college admission professionals who seek to increase the rates of participation in postsecondary education for undocumented students.

### College Access and Admission as College-Going Literacy

College access and admission can be understood as a broader project of learning across students' lives (Gildersleeve, forthcoming, 2009a, 2008). Throughout this project of learning, students are taught different pathways via their educational contexts, both in and out of school. They learn expectations, both external (established by others) and internal (established by self). Students learn different ways to approach school and the admission process which are largely influenced by students' social and cultural contexts (Gutiérrez 2008; Rogoff 2003). In order to take action toward college admission, students must make sense of their learning in meaningful ways. This critical moment moves students' learning from passive to active—from de facto participation in college-going to exercising a college-going literacy (Gildersleeve, forthcoming, 2009a, 2006). Students develop college-going literacy when afforded the opportunity to recognize, critique and re-imagine their own participation in the process. The life history narratives presented aim to illustrate the social and cultural contexts that shape these opportunities for undocumented students, while highlighting some key moments when and where students furthered their development of college-going literacy.

### Life History as a Method of Inquiry and Representation

The data and analyses for this article stem from a broader on-going ethnographic inquiry into the college-going experiences of immigrant youth (see Gildersleeve 2006, 2009a, forthcoming). Part of that inquiry focuses on four undocumented Mexican

migrant students. Data collected for the broader project include extensive anthropological life history interviews (Wolcott 1999). Life history work seeks to understand cultural activity through one person's participation in it (Marshall & Rossman 2006). It analyzes the cultural engagement of the individual in a broader phenomenon (e.g., college-going). Drawing on extensive interviews about an individual's life course, turning points, dimensions, and adaptations, anthropological life history provides a unique sociocultural analysis of how people participate in everyday life (Wolcott 1999).

The life history narratives were compiled from a collection of interviews and ethnographic encounters with four undocumented students. All four students identified as undocumented, Mexican migrant students, and all four were male. Two were seniors in high school when the project began, and the other two were juniors. All four young men came from Mexican immigrant families that worked in migrant labor industries in California (e.g., agriculture).

More than 120 hours of formal interviewing and field notes from countless hours of time spent "hanging out" with each of these students were collected over the past four years. Most of the formal interviewing was done in the first year of the inquiry, although formal interviews have continued biannually since. After amassing these rich data, the students' narratives were analyzed to understand the critical moments in their migration stories that led up to their college admission practices. Outlining these pathways to college admission allowed a more anthropological or ethnographic lens to search the data for cultural understandings of how these moments mattered in students' college-going lives.

In order to represent these moments in holistic and honorable ways while retaining the confidentiality of participants, one composite history was created based off the four life histories collected and is presented as part of the broader project. This composite takes the form of the life history of "Carlitos," a Mexican migrant and undocumented student in California. The quotes, used to introduce the main sections of the life history, are actual quotes from the four young men. As the ethnographer, the author constructed the rest of the text of the life history based on data collected over the past four years with the participants. Each of the undocumented students whose lives make up this composite have reviewed the narrative; they have provided insights, critiques and generally support the representation of their collective experience.

### Carlitos—A Life History of an Undocumented Student

This life history traverses five significant moments on a pathway to college admission before taking explicit action directed at educational access in a sixth moment. These moments are presented chronologically, although their influence on college admission is far more fluid, cumulatively creating the broader social contexts through which an undocumented student might persist toward college access. Although a composite representation of different stu-



dents actual experiences, each student's life history shared these six conceptual moments.

#### First moment

*"We were poor. We were really really poor. Not like we're poor here in California. We didn't always eat. We didn't know what to do. And we weren't like other Mexicans. We didn't speak Spanish. We were indigenous."*

Born in a small agricultural village in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, Carlitos's first language was the third dialect of an indigenous language spoken by only a handful of villagers. His family was poor—destitute, often not knowing where their next meal would come from, nor when they might have enough food to feed the entire family.

#### Second moment

*"I don't really remember school in Mexico. After my parents left, I didn't go very much. I helped my grandmother, because she was taking care of me."*

By the time Carlitos was six, both of his parents had migrated into California, leaving Carlitos in the charge of his grandmother. In order to make ends meet, Carlitos stopped attending school and instead helped his grandmother earn more income by assisting her arts and crafts work.

#### Third moment

*"Living in the north was the darkest part of my life. We were alone, except for my uncle who was a bad man. My parents were building our family up here [in California], and I was taking care of my grandmother in Mexico. We were still poor. Very poor. I was afraid I'd never get out."*

When their life in the village became unsustainable, Carlitos and his grandmother migrated to the northern provinces of Mexico in search of his uncle. They found him in the sprawling agricultural economy of the Mexico-US border. Carlitos immediately went to work with his uncle in the fields. He learned Spanish quickly while working alongside other fieldworkers. Over the next three years,



For the first time in his life, he was afforded the opportunity to safely indulge in the development of his mind. He excelled in math. Carlitos' performance on the school's placement test placed him in a higher level than the school offered.

Carlitos was enrolled in school for less than nine cumulative months. He suffered verbal, emotional and physical abuse from his uncle.

Carlitos and his grandmother grew increasingly frustrated by their circumstances. Carlitos' father was made aware of their still unstable economic conditions, as well as the abusive relations between Carlitos and his uncle. It was arranged to bring Carlitos and his grandmother into California, but at the last minute, plans were cancelled. Carlitos's parents had two more children that had been born in the US. Their own economic condition was at a subsistence level. The coyoté (a person paid to guide migrants across the border) they had planned to use to get Carlitos and his grandmother across the border became too expensive. The increasingly militarized climate of the US-Mexico border was deemed to be too dangerous. The entire trip seemed too risky at the time.

#### *Fourth moment*

*"It was very hard. And it was scary, but I knew we were going to make it. We had to make it. My grandmother doesn't talk about crossing. But me, I think it's important to remember it. I don't want to forget it, and I don't want it to ... it was very hard."*

Months later, however, new arrangements were made, and Carlitos and his grandmother were to meet a man on a specific day at a specific time in a specific place. They were going to cross.

Carlitos and his grandmother were allowed to bring a small backpack of essential belongings and food. They were provided one gallon of water to share. They were to set off on a six-day hike through the desert borderlands. When they met their coyoté they were almost denied, despite the fact that their passage had already been paid for. They were told they needed more money, and that Carlitos could not cross because he was wearing a red shirt. The red would be too easy for the US Border Patrol to spot, and it would endanger the entire trip. Carlitos had long since taken responsibility as the primary decision-maker for he and his grandmother, as she had not learned Spanish, and was physically less able to contribute to the household economy. Carlitos, at the age of 11, stood up to the coyoté and informed him that Carlitos and his grandmother would be crossing on this trip. Their payment had been

received in full, and Carlitos was willing to risk the entire group's safety because he was wearing the only shirt he owned.

Two weeks later, Carlitos and his grandmother were reunited with his parents, and they met his younger siblings for the first time.

#### *Fifth moment*

*"Oh my God. I hate school. Oh my God. I love school."*

After working in the fields with his parents that summer, Carlitos, now 12, entered compulsory education for the first time. Carlitos' primary language has never been part of his US schooling. Rather, with a Spanish surname, and a corporeal presentation similar to other Spanish-speaking Latino students in California public schools, Carlitos was immediately placed in Spanish-to-English language development classes. He was subjected to racially-discriminating practices that often plague public schools.

Schooling was a nightmare.

Schooling was a dream.

For the first time in his life, he was afforded the opportunity to safely indulge in the development of his mind. He excelled in math. Carlitos' performance on the school's placement test placed him in a higher level than the school offered. By the time he reached his sophomore year, Carlitos was taking college-level calculus, the highest level offered in his high school. He voraciously read every book and textbook he could get his hands on, whether it be in his developing Spanish or developing English languages. He was relieved from working in the fields for weeks at a time. He only worked with his parents during school vacations and in the summer time. He made friends on the basketball courts in his neighborhood.

Education was recognized as a necessary achievement to further his family's goal of sustainability. Without an education, Carlitos' future looked like the darkest parts of his past. In ninth grade, Carlitos' math achievements placed him in a class with college-bound students in the Advanced Placement track. Carlitos had become adept at negotiating his environments and figuring out what he needed to do

in order to survive. He learned that in the US, a college education was necessary for the stability his family so desperately longed for. Yet, he, and his family, did not know what a college education was.

Carlitos asked some of his friends on the basketball courts what college was. Their response was not as optimistic as his inquiry. His friends were mostly older boys in the neighborhood who had either departed school or no longer aspired to postsecondary education. When Carlitos questioned them about their disinterest in what Carlitos thought was the surest way to achieve his family's dreams of living a more sustainable life in California, his friend reminded him that they were all *sin papeles* (without papers).

As Carlitos said, "Suddenly, we were illegal."

It was as if he had found the golden key to opportunity only to find out it was actually made of brass.

A fear of government authority had accompanied Carlitos his entire life. In Oaxaca, he and his grandmother feared the on-going militarization surrounding their village community. Near the Mexico-US border, he and his uncle witnessed the lack of effectiveness and interest from officials in regulating and enforcing fair labor practices. As he crossed into California, the threat of the US Border Patrol was palpable. In the San Joaquin Valley, his family had already mastered a litany of strategies for avoiding La Migra (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). Believing in the state's commitment to make life better and safer was not part of the family's constitution. Believing in the dreams of opportunity was.

#### *Sixth moment*

*"The Dream Act, AB540, the protests, the protests against the protests—it's all about college for me. It's all related. My school hasn't been the best. My English isn't the best. My options aren't the best. And none of that is really fair. None of it. But I'm still here, and I still need to go to college."*

Despite the ever-present dangers of state authority, Carlitos yearned to find a way to make his family's sacrifices matter in their quest for stability. After participating in a summer outreach program at UCLA, Carlitos turned his (im)migration into a powerful tool that he used to interrogate the injustices he had already known and continued to face in his daily life. As political interest in immigration continued to fester during the fall and spring of 2005-06, Carlitos increasingly used his family's history with (im)migration as the lens through which to make sense and take action in the world. Carlitos started a school-based initiative to educate teachers, staff and fellow students about California's AB540, a state law that extends in-state tuition benefits to undocumented students. When mass protests around immigration reform emerged across the nation, Carlitos helped organize

a school-wide walkout and march in protest of the racist, anti-education, anti-opportunity, and dehumanizing discourse of the bill. Carlitos was coming to know his educational opportunity as a politicized process with dire consequences. Inspired, he said, "Immigration is why I have to go to college... without immigration, I wouldn't be here. I might not be alive... If I don't go to college, it will be like I am back in Mexico. It will be more of the bad that I have fought so hard to leave behind... I can't let the oppressors take away any more of my family's humanization."

#### *Epilogue*

*"I got in, but I'm not going. The scholarship is only good for people with papers. And my family need me to work anyway."*

Carlitos was admitted to two University of California campuses, two California State University campuses, as well as three elite private schools (one in California, and two on the East Coast). Carlitos was awarded a prestigious scholarship at one of the private institutions, but he could not accept it, because he could not provide a Social Security number. He enrolled at a local community college, because he could not afford any of his other options. Despite California's comparatively progressive policy on in-state tuition, as an undocumented student, Carlitos did not qualify for any state or federal financial aid. Not only were tuition and fees prohibitive, but he needed to continue to contribute to the family income by working in the fields whenever possible. After two years at the community college, Carlitos transferred to a nearby California State University, where he is pursuing a math major.

#### *Insights from Carlitos' Life History*

This life history narrative illustrates how influences outside of Carlitos' direct college admission practices informed his process of coming to know college and college opportunities. Family, labor and schooling all became influences that mattered in Carlitos' development of college-going literacy.

#### *Family contexts*

Family influences have been shown to be tremendous in college-going choices (Kiyama 2008; Tierney & Auerbach 2005). For undocumented students, family becomes most salient in the way that students' migration plays out in their aspiration development. As seen in Carlitos' life history, his family's sacrifices, their tough decisions, and their troubled journeys all inform his desire and drive to get to college. His family's struggles with poverty, abuse and security also inform his need to figure things out, including a need to figure out how to get the social opportunities his family has fought so hard for. These family influences are not unusual for first-generation, immigrant children (Horn & Nuñez 2000). However, they appear to become especially poignant for undocumented students who shared in their family's migration practices first-hand. Importantly, the family's influence over aspiration development appears to play a sustaining role in the quest for college



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admission, as evidenced by the recurring roles of family throughout Carlitos' life history. Family does more than suggest and validate the desire to go to college; family becomes the desire to go to college.

Furthermore, family, in Carlitos' life history, extends beyond his parents. Extended family, such as Carlitos' grandmother, play pivotal roles. Other scholars have pointed to a need to conceive of family in more dynamic ways, particularly for Latino immigrant families (Hurtado-Ortiz & Gauvain 2007; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha 2001). Carlitos' life history illustrates that understanding family is an indispensable asset when seeking to understand undocumented students' college-going literacy development, and ultimately their college choice practices. As learned from the life history's epilogue, Carlitos' college opportunities' interconnection with his family's economic vitality was a driving consideration in his ultimate choice to attend a community college.

#### *Labor contexts*

Enmeshed within the family contexts are the labor contexts through which undocumented students make sense and meaning of college-going opportunities. In Carlitos' life history, these contexts are those of the Mexican migrant communities across California. Marked by long hours, low pay, dangerous health conditions, insecure job stability, and an often times politically hostile environment, migrant labor in California mirrors many of the same dilemmas that other immigrant communities face in their employment contexts (Bloom 2005; Rothenberg 1998). Carlitos played a direct role in his family's economic sustainability. He worked the fields both in Mexico and in the US. Carlitos had been working nearly his entire life by the time he applied to college. These are common experiences across immigrant families, and especially salient in undocumented families (Orellana 2001; Rothenberg 1998).

When making sense of how these labor contexts might inform the college-going literacy development, and ultimately the college admission practices of undocumented students, it helps to recognize that as workers, undocumented students have known the world in dramatically different ways than many of their peers. They have experiences and have made contributions to their families that many college applicants cannot even imagine. Recognizing these at-

tributes can go a long way in the cultivation of a college applicant, particularly when designing services that might target immigrant communities.

#### *Schooling contexts*

These ways of knowing are neglected, not only in college admission, but also in students' academic preparation. As exemplified by Carlitos' experiences in English language development courses, schools widely do not have the infrastructure, ability or desire to respond to the contexts of undocumented students' lives (Arzubiaga & Noguerón 2009; Durán 1987; Rothenberg 1998; Rumbaut 1995). At school, undocumented students might face a myriad of challenges which may be directly related to their academic preparation, such as a curriculum that does not draw upon their social and cultural contexts. Challenges might also stem from the school's college-going culture overall, such as a dearth of adequate college counseling (McDonough 2005; 1997). Unfortunately, undocumented students are more likely to attend schools that are under-performing and overly-constrained, be they in either urban or rural areas (Arzubiaga & Noguerón 2009; Ranero & Gildersleeve 2008). As seen in the life history of Carlitos, schools fail undocumented students regularly.

Yet, schooling also provided Carlitos an opportunity to imagine a new way of living and knowing. Schooling afforded Carlitos the awareness that college was necessary to secure the sustainability his family had been seeking. Schooling afforded Carlitos an opportunity to generate a peer group for the first time in his young life. This peer group helped generate Carlitos' identity as an undocumented student, but also gave him a social space to figure out some of his social dilemmas. Schooling made it possible for Carlitos to feel some sense of security. In these ways, schooling plays an exceptional, rather than a normative role in some undocumented students' lives. This double-edged sword that schooling plays is a significant finding. It demonstrates that schooling has tremendous ability to transform students' college-going literacy development, yet at the same time, has an equally tremendous ability to constrain students' college access opportunities. As other scholars have suggested, these conditions of schooling may not be unique to undocumented students, but their influence appears to be more extreme (Knight, Dixon, Norton, & Bentley 2006; Bernal 2006; Holling 2006).

### From Insights to Action

It is important to note that the development of college-going literacy was nearly completely serendipitous in the life history of Carlitos. The only targeted moment when college-going was the direct object of learning in his life came when he participated in the UCLA outreach program. This is typical in immigrant families, particularly in Latino migrant communities in California (Gildersleeve, forthcoming; 2009b; 2006). The point is to understand that undocumented students' learning in direct relation to college-going and college admission is an exceptional, rather than normative activity. There were no institutionalized efforts to ensure that Carlitos would get to college.

After getting a clearer picture of what the social contexts of college-going can mean and how they can matter in an undocumented students' life, admission officers and college counselors can choose to engage with undocumented students as college-going pedagogues—knowledgeable individuals who see themselves as assisting students' development of college-going literacy (Gildersleeve, forthcoming; Gildersleeve & Ranero, forthcoming). As college-going pedagogues, admission officers and college counselors would take responsibility for learning more about the social contexts of undocumented students lives, on an individual basis with the undocumented students that come across their files and into their offices. However, familiarity will not be enough. These contexts must be valued as assets in order for college-going pedagogues to really engage in meaningful teaching and learning with undocumented students. When the conditions, circumstances and cultures of undocumented students lives are understood as assets in their ability to learn and processes of coming to know college opportunities, then admission officers and college counselors will be able to advocate more effectively for policies, programs and services that might make college-going a more normative experience for undocumented students.

Becoming college-going pedagogues requires admission offices and college counseling programs to re-imagine their role in the college-going of undocumented students. Admission professionals are uniquely situated to respond to the social contexts of undocumented students in proactive ways. From recruitment, outreach, counseling, and coordination activities, admission professionals can more holistically connect students' contextual understandings to the institutional knowledge that is most powerful in supporting undocumented students' access and admission to higher education.

### Conclusion

The genesis of a college applicant has consequences that combine with the influences of her/his social and cultural contexts that ultimately shape the pathways that any given applicant can take toward college admission. For undocumented stu-

dents, the genesis and possible pathways take form between and beyond the borders of any single country. In order to serve these students, admission professionals can re-imagine their practices and begin to frame themselves as college-going pedagogues who seek to foster the development of college-going literacies for undocumented students. As college-going pedagogues, it becomes imperative to learn more deeply about the social and cultural contexts that constitute the genesis and pathways to admission for undocumented students.



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